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ABSTRACT

Plans for advocacy networks were incorporated into a project to promote Appalachian middle school girls' interest and persistence in science, mathematics, and technology. The project took place at rural and urban sites with diverse (White and African American), low-income populations. The girls were invited to participate in the 3-year project without regard for their grades, teacher recommendations, or expressed interest in science and mathematics and were selected through stratified random sampling to ensure representative numbers of Anglo and African American participants. This paper focuses on the development of networks of "advocates"--parents, mentors, and teachers who would support the girls' schooling and aspirations. Advocate meetings were designed to focus on the girls as students whose futures were worthy of time and effort, to give weight to the girls' achievements, to engage advocates and girls with one another, and to provide information that could empower advocates to promote the girls' academic futures. Initially, at both rural and urban sites, low-income girls faced similar constraints on academic success: low teacher expectations, lack of resources in schools, peer pressure toward active sexuality, and low parental involvement. Yet efforts to develop visible networks of advocate support produced dramatically different results, with family involvement much greater at the rural site. This outcome is discussed in relation to rural church-going activities versus urban consumer attitudes. (Contains 22 references.) (SV)

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Advocacy Networks for Girls' Education in a Rural and an Urban Community

Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the
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Perspectives and objectives

It is generally agreed that involving family and communities in educating children is a worthwhile effort. There is ample evidence that when parents and school people work in concert to support children's education, children are more successful in school. (Epstein, 1992; Davies, 1992; Comer,1980; Green&Sancho, 1990). Our belief in the importance of family and community support of and involvement with children's learning led us to incorporate plans for advocacy networks in *Rural and Urban Images: Voices of Girls in Science, Mathematics and Technology*, a National Science Foundation funded project to promote middle school girls' interest and persistence in SMT.[1]

Yet the situated reality of family involvement is far more complex and thorny than generic approval would indicate. What kind and how much parent involvement is desired by school personnel depends on the culture of the school, community culture, and above all, whose families are to be involved. Middle class Anglo-American families are the implicit default group who, in a mobius strip, are defined by school culture as students and define it as parents and school personnel. Some have suggested that low income families, particularly if they are minorities, lack sufficient social and cultural capital to nourish their children's academic life or to gain academic resources for them. (Lareau, A, 1987; Coleman, J. 1988). Others suggest that if low-income children are to be well-served, school personnel must learn to acknowledge and benefit from the wisdom and "cultural capital" of such families. (Davies, 1992; Delgado-Gaitan, 1990). We share the view of Davies and Delgado-Gaitan.

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[1] For purposes of brevity the phrase 'science, mathematics and technology' will be referred to as SMT throughout this paper

We designed *Voices* project activities to explore the science and mathematics in the cultural experience of Appalachian women, and chose to implement it in two ethnically mixed, low-income Appalachian communities, one urban, the other rural. This paper explores the similarities and differences between the urban and rural networks formed to support and advocate for the girls involvement with science, mathematics and technology in the project and in their schools.

Voices project elements

Rural and Urban Images: Voices of Girls in Science, Mathematics and Technology is a three year research and development project that began working with seventy sixth grade girls in the fall of 1995. Project goals include (1) developing SMT curriculum materials based in the experience of Appalachian women. (2) learning what is necessary to maintain the interest and persistence in SMT of Anglo and African American girls from low income rural and urban families (3) producing a documentary about the experience with the project of the rural girls, their families and teachers.

Work with the girls includes:

(1) monthly Saturday sessions where the girls engaged in activities using science, mathematics and technology,

(2) bi-monthly meetings with advocates/family members and girls together,

(3) mentoring relationships between the girls and other female community members,

(4)a twice weekly after school tutoring program that was added in the second year in response to the need,

(5) regular contact with in-school coordinators and

(6) occasional field trips.

School coordinators are also teachers or counselors in the girls' schools. Parent contact is maintained by community coordinators who live in and work with the girls' communities.

Methodology

In the research component of this project we have used a variety of methods to develop and test our understandings of the girls and their advocacy networks. Our approach is primarily qualitative, drawing upon sources including Lincoln and Guba (1985), and Bogdan and Biklen (1992). Data sources about the advocate network include: 1) multiple structured and unstructured interviews of parents, girls, and school personnel; 2) field notes on project sessions, parent meetings, meetings of project staff and others; 3) notes, photographs and video, 4) researcher reflections; 5) parent and teacher reflections and logs; 6) survey and demographic information; and 7) document and film analysis. We have also used photography and video to document and reflect the material cultures of the communities and schools that are part of the project in order to aid analysis and to convey the impact of geography and place on the girls and their families. In the last project year we have added independent researchers who observe project activities, observe the girls' SMT classes and interview the girls, their teachers and families.

Project locales

The rural and urban *Voices* sites, which for purposes of this paper I will call Mountain and River, are similar in family incomes and ethnicity. Both locales have significant African-American populations, particularly in the neighborhoods of the *Voices* girls. In the rural site the girls come from two communities and schools. One is Mountain's county seat. By comparison with outlying communities, residents are relatively prosperous and few are African-American However, about

half of the outlying school's students are African-American and 84% qualify for free or reduced price lunch. Mountain is a severely economically depressed county once flush with coal mining jobs. "Rural" in Mountain means isolated, not pastoral. In fact, as Gaventa (1980) points out, modern coal mining areas have more in common with cities abandoned by industry than with the agricultural areas that the term 'rural' normally evokes.

The neighborhoods in River from which *Voices* participants are drawn include low-income housing projects, apartments and homes, some of which are in areas considered to be dangerous and drug-ridden. These neighborhoods lie in a metropolitan area of about 250,000 whose relative affluence comes from diverse business and industry. The girls attend a junior high school one quarter of whose students are African-American. The school reports 45% of its students qualify for free or reduced price lunch.

In both Mountain and River girls were invited to participate in *Voices* without regard to their grades, teacher recommendations, or expressed interest in science, mathematics and technology. They were selected through stratified random sampling to assure a representative number of Anglo and African American participants. We chose to place no restrictions on project participation, suspecting that girls from low-income and minority families were less likely than their middle class sisters to have had the opportunity to discover an interest in these subjects or be challenged to excel in them.

Advocate networks

We planned advocacy networks at both urban and rural sites not only because of the general value of family involvement in education, but in recognition that "In studies of women engineering, mathematics and science students, parents were most frequently mentioned as the most important influence in young women's

decisions to go into science and engineering" (Campbell, 1992) . Our understanding of the term "advocate" is that of "a significant adult in the student's life who can 1) interpret the school system for them 2) persistently encourage the student and believe in the student's real ability and 3) (is) actively involved in the schools to advocate for the student" (Trueba & Delgado-Gaitan, 1988,12). We designed advocate meetings to achieve several purposes:

- **To focus on girls as students whose futures were worthy of time and effort.** Meetings of the advocate networks always included the *Voices* girls in order that they could have the experience of a community of adults hearing their aspirations and giving respect to their schooling. For example, in several meetings girls wrote their aspirations which were posted on meeting room walls for all to read.
- **To give weight to the girls' achievements.** We called on the girls increasingly over time to report and demonstrate activities in advocate meetings. Among other things, they demonstrated the working of robots they had built, reported the results of surveys they had designed, administered and analyzed, and showed adults how to use the Internet.
- **To engage advocates and girls with one another.** The girls and advocates planned and problem solved together, interviewed each other, told each other stories, and played games together.

- **To bring information to advocates that could empower them to promote the girls' academic futures.** During advocate meetings

> we discussed parents' rights, strategies for effective conferences, interpreting test results, how course placement decisions are made, the gatekeeper role of advanced science and mathematics courses, college entrance requirements and the availability of financial aid for college.

Given the well-documented tendency for many girls entering puberty to lose interest in traditionally male pursuits and to grow quiet in public arenas (Orenstein,1994; Pipher,1994; Gilligan, 1990) our goals were, through advocacy meetings, mentoring and project activities, to nourish in the *Voices* girls the conviction that they had the power to shape their futures. We wanted them to know that their aspirations, thoughts and actions counted in their world, as well as to weave together a network of caring adults - families, teachers and mentors - convinced that girls should challenge themselves in SMT and willing to act in support of their convictions.

It was anticipated that developing the advocacy networks might be particularly problematic in Mountain. We were aware that the prototype of the mountain woman's role is the traditional one of 'stand by your man and raise up your children' rather than 'compete with men and earn a good living' A recently concluded five year study of coalminer's wives found that the image of coal miners wives held by their daughters is one of "super homemakers who worry about their husbands' safety and possess an all-consuming devotion to the family."(O'Quinn, 1998). We expected resistance to the message that girls could or should pursue academic paths outside gender norms. Also, because persistent poverty areas like Mountain frequently lose their young people to jobs elsewhere once they become

college-educated,[2] wve anticipated reluctance to encourage young people in directions that might t lure them away from their communities. (DeYoung,1993).

We believed tthat River would be less problematic, given the common experience of womern in the workplace and the local availability of jobs. We felt that once we establisshed our credentials as people committed to their daughters' welfare, parents wouuld respond. In fact, the urban site proved to be far more problematic, if visibble activity around girls' schooling and participation in the advocate network arre taken as measures of support.

Initially, advcocate meetings were similarly structured in both Mountain and River. Meetings weere held in schools on weekday evenings. We provided child care, bus transportattion to meeting sites and meals. Meeting activities were generally the same iin both sites. As the project progressed, although the number, structure and contennt of the Mountain and River advocate meetings remained similar, some conditttions diverged between the sites in response to differing circumstances. Thee River meeting site was moved to a near-by community center which was more conmfortable both physically and psychologically[3] for the advocates, while thee Mountain site remained in the school. Transportation was dropped in River ass the need for it dwindled. In the second year Mountain advocates formed committees ; that consulted together during part of their advocate meetings. No committees formmed in River.

Constraints on Girls' Academic Success

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[2]Mountain Counnty has lost 62% of its 1980 population, according to a billboard prominently placed alongg the county's main highway.

[3] The communityy center was familiar to and frequently used by the girls' families. The school was not.

As we grew in knowledge of and experience with the two sites, we were struck by the similarities in dilemmas confronting the girls despite the obvious differences between rural mountain and urban environments. Absent any change in the status quo, prospects for academic rigor for many of the students in both sites were dim. In the River school students were tracked and school personnel expressed low expectations of lower track students. Mountain schools were resource poor and scores on standardized tests were lowest in the state in 1997. Teachers did not believe their students could reach levels of achievement comparable to other districts. As a counselor told us, "An A here is not the same as an A elsewhere."

Girls in both sites faced peer pressure toward active sexuality. In each site a girl dropped away from the project when she became sexually involved with a male much older than she. In both sites girls said they were aware of drug deals in their neighborhoods, and talked of witnessing or participating in fights. In interviews both Mountain and River girls said that being female meant having less attention and more domestic responsibility than boys.

In both sites although the girls' families expressed strong belief in the importance of a good education, few made it a practice to oversee their children's journey through the schools. Yet efforts to develop a visible network of advocate support produced dramatically different results in Mountain and River. We posit that these differences may have more to do with style than substance.

Marketplace or Church

Our experience with families in Mountain and River confirms the results of numerous national surveys that, whatever parents' view of the state of education in general may be, they express satisfaction with the schools their children attend, even when the school may not be serving them well. Additionally, families in both

sites saw education as an avenue to a better life. As Porter (1996) reports in her study of a Kentucky community similar to Mountain,

> Hickory Countians manage to maintain a tenacious hold on the ideal that education is the key to their future. Rather than seeing the [economic] statistics as evidence that larger forces were at work, they interpreted these to mean that if only they had more, better, or a different education, the job market would pick up. p. 103

Their commonly held faith in education did not, however, produce similar behaviors.

River families participated in *Voices* advocate meetings and activities less often and in fewer numbers than their Mountain counterparts. In "Parental Involvement: A Contrast between Rural and Other Communities (August, 1994)," Yongmin Sun hypothesizes that "residential location has a potential 'contextual' effect on frequencies of parents' participation in school-related activities. Sun poses that "since the cultural norms and rituals in urban areas generally reflect impersonal social relationships and less attachment to local communities, urban parents (are) less likely to participate in school-related activities." However, Sun's study found low SES more strongly suppressed parent participation in rural than urban areas. The levels of participation in *Voices* of Mountain and River families supports the hypothesis but not the findings. Low SES has not appeared to suppress rural parents' participation. We use the metaphors of church and marketplace to characterize our experience of the differences between rural and urban advocacy networks.

In Mountain church-going is a common community event. On the occasions that girls or adults were absent from *Voices* events, it was usually due either to family illness or to conflicting church activities. The cultural norms of churh

participation involve adults and children together. Desmond Runyan (1998), director of LONGSPAN, a twenty year on-going study of at-risk children, has found that church-going is strongly linked with resiliency in at-risk children. He supposes that "Going to church may be particularly important (in building resiliency) because it is one of the few kinds of social networks that people have that typically involves both the child and the adult in the same network."

While many families of the *Voices* participants in River are also involved in church activities, the general level of involvement is less and its nature more like that of a consumer with a service provider. The River community coordinator, who has a long history of working with young people in church sponsored programs, reports that she has found parents will see that their children get to church activities, but are unlikely to participate with them, even when such participation has been sought. We describe this behavior as that of the marketplace, where the primary adult responsibility is to identify and obtain products and services.

Two Mountains

Before exploring the contrasts between Mountain and River advocate networks, it is necessary first to describe in greater detail the particular socio-economic structure of Mountain. The town and outlying schools from which we drew *Voices* participants serve very different populations. The town's population, while hardly wealthy, is the most prosperous in the county. Political power resides here. *Voices* girls from the town school are accustomed to their parents' presence in and involvement with schools. One girl's parent is a school system administrator. The parents of several others are teachers. Another's parents are pharmacists.

Many of the town school's parents are accustomed to entitlement.[4] In an advocate meeting during which the advocates planned strategies to restore algebra to Mountain's middle schools[5] the pharmacist announced that he would call the superintendent, to whom he referred by first name, since he wanted to go "straight to the top." In the course of planning for a field trip early in the project we asked the town school's coordinator about finding chaperones. She replied that there would be no problem. She could always count on "her Moms." The families of *Voices* girls from this school are involved in numerous school and community activities in addition to church-going. They and their families clearly expect be noticed and heard. Teachers and parents attend the same churches, shop in the same stores, and maintain personal friendships. During advocate meetings casual conversation among town teachers and parents is about people and events that are common currency between them. Relations between home and school for these families are more typical of middle-class, suburban communities than low-income rural or urban families.

The outlying school from which *Voices* girls are drawn is another story. Like the town school, many of the teachers from this school were raised in the school's communities. They also attend churches and community events and take satisfaction from knowing their students' families and circumstances. However, few now live in Mountain. They have moved outside the county, some commuting more than an hour between home and school.

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[4] One parent, also a teacher at the school, was outraged that her daughter was not among the randomly selected group of girls to be invited to join *Voices*. She has continued to complain of the 'injustice' of her daughter's exclusion.

[5] Algebra had been dropped from the middle school curriculum the previous year.

While commonly known people and events also characterize casual conversation between teachers and families in the outlying school, home-school talk about education is rare. One teacher offered as evidence of her good relationship with parents the fact that she'd never had a parent conference. Parent conferences are reserved for trouble and, she said, "parents trust me." This example is not an anomoly in the school. Teachers and administrators give evidence of caring deeply for their students' emotional and physical well being. Because they knew their students' families and have experiences in common with them, they do not see the school as an island surrounded by the unknown dangers of alien cultures. But they express only a *pro forma* need to include families in educational considerations. Standardized information about tests and grades are sent home with students and PTA meetings are held. But the school coordinator says, without noticeable frustration, that few parents come to meetings or are involved in school. Trust - or passivity - is the norm in home-school relations.

The contrasting styles between town and outlying communities were evident early in advocate meetings. Town families spoke. Outlying families listened. Gradually, as people grew more comfortable with one another and participated in activities requiring cross-community dialogue, outlying families became more vocal and willing to assume responsibility for project tasks in advocate meetings, such as gathering items for the newsletter from the girls in the outlying school, helping plan the project's ending field trip, keeping track of points earned by the girls toward the trip. (The point system was designed by the advocates.) The community coordinator remarked that an outlying parent who had volunteered to lead a committee had never before asserted herself in school settings. A highlight of this growing comfort was a recent incident in which an outlying school parent instructed a town parent (and teacher) in how to keep accurate count of points.

Since the outlying Mountain school's families are a far closer match to River's in terms of class, school involvement and access to power, we will compare mainly behaviors and networks formed in the outlying community to behaviors and networks in River.

Advocate Network Impact - Mountain

Voices appears to have had an unanticipated impact on involved adults from the outlying school, raising expectations for themselves along with expectations for their daughters. Far from the reluctance we had anticipated to encouraging girls in non-traditional arenas of study or educating them above their station, we have seen outlying adults eager to share in new experiences with the girls. Parents frequently came to the girls' Saturday workshops to observe and occasionally participate. Six outlying parents accompanied their daughters to an Expanding Your Horizons day on the campus of a River Historically Black College. There they shared in SMT activities organized for the girls, toured the college and met with the admissions officer. Afterwards, some expressed yearning to attend such a college. We have heard mothers, in speaking of their daughters' aspirations, talk wistfully of their own unrealized dreams. One girl's aunt, who has been silently present at every function, recently asked the community coordinator whether she thought she was too old to get a computer.

Mountain's community coordinator says she has been surprised at the number of people who come to meetings who do not normally attend school functions. It has been common to have between seventy and eighty people at meetings, not counting the girls' younger brothers and sisters. Adult sisters, aunts and grandparents have attended either with or in place of parents. The coordinator attributes high attendance to the fact that *Voices* is "new and different" and says that

families are eager to do anything that will help their children. We hypothesize that while novelty and hope contribute, similarity to church-going activities plays a critical part. As in Sunday school, community adults help children and children perform for adults. Evening activities included meals. The possibly unfamiliar content of SMT is linked with the familiar activities of quilting, food preservation, and folk remedies. Adults are invited to participate in ways that are familiar to them from their church experience.

Over the course of the project, a network of support from mentors, families and teachers has formed around the girls in each of the two Mountain middle schools involved with *Voices*. Roles have overlapped. Parents and teachers have served as mentors. Some teachers were parent/advocates. Although, networks for town and outlying girls have remained distinct, together they have provided encouragement, status and approval to all the *Voices* girls.

At least partially as a result, we have seen many of the girls improve their grades in science and mathematics, enroll in more challenging math classes, volunteer for or be nominated for leadership roles in their schools. Several girls have videotaped science events for teachers. Others have found web sites with resources for teachers. Some girls have entered the science fair for the first time. One girl, whose father had insisted on her inclusion in an 8th grade Algebra class in spite of her lacking pre-algebra, was selected for the first time to compete in a math field day. Over 70% of Mountain girls have persisted in the project, with most losses due to families moving out of the district.

However, whether advocates' involvement with *Voices* will produce advocacy for improving SMT curriculum and instruction for girls - and boys - is questionable. Parents know that teachers' concern for their children is sincere and have traditionally trusted that their concern equates with good instruction. Parent

interviews reveal that the most commonly expressed role they see themselves playing in their children's education is support and encouragement at home. The only parent interviewed who made evaluative comments about school was himself a school system administrator. While advocate meetings have encouraged parents to take a more proactive stance vis a vis the school, we are not confident that most families' experience with the *Voices* program is sufficient to counter social and school norms.

At the same time, teachers' concern for their students' well-being does not necessarily extend to expecting them to excel academically. While almost all the *Voices* girls from the town school assumed that they would go to college, that goal was less commonly expressed in interviews with girls in the outlying school. Who one's folks are and where they fit in the socio-economic hierarchy is assumed to strongly shape one's own destiny. Teachers have predicted of some of their students that they will get pregnant and live on the dole like their families. One girl reflected the power of such expectations in commenting, "Having babies runs in my family."

Many teachers' concern for their students takes the form of protectiveness. They build self esteem by offering praise for small achievements. They are cautious about adding challenging curricula, lest their students experience failure. When algebra was reintroduced into the eighth grade curriculum, we found that it was taught at a creeping pace. Inevitably, those who enroll in Algebra II in high school will be insufficiently prepared.

Marketplace

Differences of class and income among the River girls' families are relatively minor. They all share a low rung in the ladder of wealth represented by students in the girls' large middle school. Class distinctions do, however, exist between these families and their daughters' middle class teachers and they are not softened by

personal and community connections. For the most part teachers have been a missing link in the support network we attempted to weave for River's *Voices* girls.

River advocate meetings, like their Mountain counterparts, began with high attendance. About fifty *Voices* girls and advocates participated in the first meeting, held at a neighborhood community center. The River families engaged enthusiastically in activities that demonstrated typical salaries of professions requiring backgrounds in science, mathematics and technology. People lingered after the meeting to talk further about the information and to express their support for the project. At the next meeting, held in a neighborhood school, fewer than half the parents at the first meeting were present. And even fewer attended the next. A community organizer who had worked in the community for years told us that parents had come to the first meeting to check the project out. Finding it worthwhile for their daughters, they felt no need to return. Accustomed to numerous school and community programs for children, they appeared to approach *Voices* as consumers assessing the value of services offered.

In spite of our adding community coordinators and changing meeting times, attendance remained low for the first two years. Five or six parents attended regularly and others came occasionally. Family attendance improved somewhat in the third year, when we returned to meeting at the community center, although we never again achieved the numbers of the first meeting.

River girls' families appeared not to have been acquainted before coming to advocate meetings, although most came from the same or contiguous neighborhoods within walking distance of the school. One girl told us she liked to come to the meetings to see the other girls' mothers. Because of the variable family participation in advocate meetings and the minimal social connections among the families, we have been unsuccessful in our attempt to establish for the girls the

sense of a community of supportive adults even though the fact that many of the *Voices* girls have regularly attended advocate meetings, whether accompanied by aa family member or not, may indicate their hunger for connection and support..

Neither was it possible to connect home and school. In the project's second year the girls moved from elementary schools to a junior high school. Where the elementary principals had been supportive, the middle school principal was openly skeptical about the value of offering a program in science and mathematics to girls not numbered among the academic elite. Despite a concerted effort, we were unable to recruit a school coordinator in this school. Instead, the school's counselor agreed to serve as project liaison while the community coordinator, who was not familiar with the school, met weekly with the girls during club period. Thee only teachers involved with the project in its second and third years have been twoo elementary teachers who have provided tutoring sessions for the girls in science and mathematics. Teachers have been an absent thread in the network.

Ostensibly we were more fortunate in the pool of women from whom to select mentors in River than in Mountain in that more women in the urban area usee science, mathematics and technology professionally. However, River's mentors anre generally unacquainted with the girls' families or their teachers. Mentors are invited to attend advocate meetings and occasionally have, but for the most part they interact with the girls individually rather than as members of a supportive network.

Even without a visible network of supportive adults and despite the project't's marginalization in their school, the girls who have persisted in *Voices* have maintained or improved their academic performance in science and mathematics. As of this writing, all but one have better than 3.0 G.P.A.'s However, the absencee of a strong advocate network is no doubt at least partially responsible for the fact

that less than one third of the girls who entered the project as sixth graders remain.

Future prospects

Families in Mountain and River share more than might be obvious. According to interviews, parents in both sites look to education to provide better lives for their daughters and regard the *Voices* project as a means to a better education. They commonly express the belief that their responsibility in education is primarily to support and encourage their daughter in the home. Advocacy is a new and uncomfortable role for most, if not all, of them. In Mountain advocacy can mean risking confronting a teacher one day only to be cut dead in K-Mart by the teacher's relatives the next. In River it can mean confronting a bureaucracy that can be indifferent, and impervious to challenge.

In neither site have parents yet seriously questioned the quality of the education offered their daughters, even though for many of them school appears to expect and offer little. While Mountain's *Voices* girls have a support network to encourage them, their schools lack the resources necessary to assure skilled instruction in challenging SMT content. River's *Voices* girls have a chance to access advanced SMT curricula and instruction if their families will use their consumer skills to insist on their daughters' inclusion in challenging classes. But lacking a network of supportive adults, many of the River girls may fail to benefit from that access, should it appear. In both sites it will take concerted effort to overcome the low expectations schools hold for the children of low income families.

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